

## 48 Black lesbian gender and sexual culture

### Celebration and resistance

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It is clear ... that rather than a lesbian community per se, there exists now a whole lesbian society comprised of different lesbian communities.

(Rothblum and Sablove 2005: xvi)

The notion that there are several forms of lesbian community in the USA, distinguished by the racial, ethnic, socioeconomic class and regional diversity that characterises the country, has been reflected in multiple studies of communities of same-gender loving women<sup>1</sup> (Lapovsky-Kennedy and Davis 1993; Morris 2005; Rabin and Slater 2005). While there are few studies that have attempted to examine the cultural systems of these lesbian communities, empirical research (see, e.g. Lapovsky-Kennedy and Davis 1993) and published personal narratives (see, e.g. Hampton 1981; Nestle 1984) on the ways lesbian community life has been organised reveal lesbian gender expression as a persistent and core feature of lesbian sexual culture.

Sexual discourse theory holds that one way to understand a group's sexual culture is to examine the ways people speak about sex and sexuality, as well as the messages they report hearing from various institutions (e.g. family, school, religion) (Schifter and Madrigal 2001). Within this framework, a researcher approaches the study of sexual culture as a dynamic construct by purposively examining both dominant and less dominant discourses regarding sex, and through the expectation that cultures do not remain the same across time.

There is relatively little empirical research on lesbian gender expression. The few researchers who study lesbian gender have focused most on butch and femme identity development processes (see, e.g. Hiestand and Levitt 2005). Of the studies on lesbian gender, fewer still included significantly black lesbians, despite documentation of the prominence of lesbian gender roles in historical or narrative accounts of black lesbian communities (see, e.g. Garber 1989; Davis 1998; Lorde 1983; Peddle 2005; Smith 1992; Walker 2001).

This absence of research on sexual lives and gender among black lesbians possibly reflects what Hammond (2002) describes as the absence of black queer women's experiences from dominant sexual discourses and the silencing of black female subjectivity. An exception is an in-depth qualitative study of a community of black lesbians in New York City (Moore 2006) that identified three categorisations of gender among black lesbians, including femme, transgressive and gender blender. Moore's study was an important step in the direction of documenting an

often ignored segment of US culture, black lesbians, with the purpose of understanding how black lesbians view their relationships from their own perspectives. The current study is aimed at adding to this body of research by specifically examining dimensions of black lesbian sexual cultures.

## **The study**

The current study on lesbian gender roles within African-American lesbian communities is part of a larger study, the Black Lesbians' Ideas about Sex and Sexuality (BLISS) study. I designed BLISS to document the defining features of African-American lesbian sexual culture in Chicago, including the beliefs, values and perspectives about sex and sexuality. The work discussed in this chapter aimed to address the following research questions:

- 1 What function, if any, does lesbian gender play in black lesbian sexual life?
- 2 How is lesbian gender constructed and understood?
- 3 What are the ranges of perspectives regarding lesbian gender in black lesbian communities?

The study aims to expand the use of sexual discourse theory to a multiple minority group. In doing so, I seek to demonstrate the complex relationships black lesbians have to sexual messages that are generated within primarily black lesbian spaces, as well as those from the multiple oppressed communities in which they may participate (e.g. women, African-American, lesbian) or through the dominant mainstream (i.e. patriarchal, European-American and heterosexual) US society.

## **Methods**

### ***Setting***

No predominantly black lesbian gay bisexual transgender (LGBT) neighbourhood in Chicago exists. However, several black LGBT organisations and groups exist, suggesting a continued resistance against intersecting oppressions and an effort to create empowering, affirmative and culturally specific spaces and institutions for LGBT people of colour. Yet, most of the organisational resources for black gay people in Chicago are through health institutions, which tend to focus primarily on HIV/AIDS services for gay and bisexual men, leaving a dearth of places for black gay people, especially women, that are not focused on issues of disease. Affinity Community Services, one of the only organisations that solely focused on black lesbians and bisexual women and an organisation that has created its own physical space, was a site for my volunteer work as a youth programme chair and board of directors member.

### ***Participants and procedures***

I employed a rapid ethnographic assessment methodology (Kluwin *et al.* 2004), including three data collection methods: focus groups, individual interviews and participant observation. Each method offered a unique lens through which to

examine African-American lesbian sexual culture. The study involved focus groups (n=9, 26 participants) with African-American lesbians; individual interviews (n=5) with community leaders;<sup>2</sup> and, participant observations (n=10 across four months) at a weekly open-mic night for African-American lesbians. Focus group participants were recruited through snowball sampling techniques and I organised the groups to include women with similar ages and education levels. Across all nine groups, participants ranged in age from 19 to 65 years ( $M=36.11$ ,  $SD=11.16$ ) and most had attended some college (n=15; high school graduate, n=2; college graduate, n=8).

I conducted the focus groups using a protocol that was composed of five domains: a) attitudes toward black lesbian community; b) defining sexuality; c) defining sex; d) butch and femme; and e) the influence of various communities (African-American, lesbian and women) on their views about sex. The open mics were important because they provided an opportunity to see how sex and sexuality were talked about outside of the research-directed setting. The individual interviews with community leaders served as an opportunity to validate and expand on the findings from the focus groups and observations.

Because the primary goal of the study was to document sexual discourses more broadly and the prominence of the lesbian gender theme in this study was emergent, I had not anticipated the need to purposively sample participants that represented various lesbian gender categories. As such, the sample is composed primarily of lesbians who reported that they did not currently have a strong or salient lesbian gender identity and the findings should be contextualised by the sample composition.

### *Analyses*

I followed a coding process endorsed by many qualitative researchers (Vaughn *et al.* 1996; Wolcott 1994). NVivo Software was used to organise the data. Most of the analytic process for focus groups and observations was completed prior to conducting the community leader interviews which were used primarily as a way to help further negotiate my interpretation of the coding structure and identify themes that may have been missed in the focus groups and observations. The final step involved integrating all the data and identifying connections between results and theory.

### **Results and discussion**

Using this analytic process, it was possible to identify several aspects of beliefs and practices regarding lesbian gender roles within African-American lesbian sexual culture in Chicago. First, I will describe how specific lesbian gender labels were constructed to create a masculine-feminine gender role dichotomy that functioned to organise sexual life. Then, I will discuss current debates among black lesbians in this community about the prominence of the roles and labels, including evidence of resistance to the polarised dichotomy of these roles. Finally, I present my interpretations of how lesbian gender was given meaning in sexual situations to produce a radical interpretation of gender sex roles. Quotes from focus group participants and community leaders and observation notes are included as evidence of key themes and relevant literature is included to illustrate connections to contemporary theory and research on lesbian gender expression. Pseudonyms are used for focus group participants and community leader interviewees.

One of the main questions of the focus group protocol was: 'Are roles or labels like butch or femme or aggressive or passive important in sex and sexuality? How so or why not?' This question was eventually rephrased to include the term 'stud' as another term for butch since this was the term most often used by participants to describe masculine gender identities, reflecting ethnic differences in masculine identity terminology in the city. Every focus group chose to devote significant time and energy to answering this question. Participants consistently highlighted lesbian gender roles as a key organising construct of African-American lesbian sexual life. Four participants claimed these labels for themselves. Several other participants supported women's adoption of these roles. The ways in which participants spoke about stud and femme categories indicated that these ways of constructing lesbian gender were part of an overarching sexual cultural norm of which all participants were aware. Within every focus group, participants conveyed a sense that the expectation to adopt a label and to operate within the category was a strong message throughout the black lesbian community. Hence, expectations to be a femme or stud appeared to be a sexual cultural script for this black lesbian community. Participants indicated that this cultural script was communicated in several contexts, including romantic relationships and community settings.

The deep roots of the social pressure to date within these roles were also evident within my observations at the open mics. Most women that appeared to be coupled off, as evidenced by them kissing or cuddling with each other, were a clear stud and femme couple. I did not observe any couple that was composed of two women that were traditionally feminine and observed only one couple in which both were dressed and acted in traditionally masculine ways. An inherent aspect of any sexual discourse is the potential disconnect between expected norms and individual transgressions against those norms (Parker 1991; Schifter and Madrigal 2001). Recognising the discrepancy between their coupling and the cultural sexual scripts' expectations within black lesbian communities in this city, I asked that couple whether they had experienced negative reactions to their being a couple in which both women appeared masculine identified. They explained that they had received harsh reactions and lack of understanding from other African-American lesbians. However, they felt that they were no longer into labels and loved each other. They had been together for over eight years, and people knew them as an established couple and eventually left them alone.

### *Constructing the dichotomous stud-femme label system*

Specific to sexual practice, participants within groups and individual community leader interviews, as well as my participant observations, provided a rich description of how the stud-femme label translated to the sexual lives of black lesbians in the community.

### *Masculine expression*

Lesbians who expressed a highly traditional masculinised gender were labelled 'hard studs' and hard studs had relatively strict guidelines for sexual practice. For example, participants talked about the 'hard studs that will come out and say, "I don't want my woman to touch me. I want to be the total pleaser"' (Leslie,

focus group discussion). Contrasting femmes and 'hard' studs, another participant claims:

[B]ecause studs mostly in traditional situations, they're usually the one who initiates, they're usually the one, who, if you have oral sex, they usually the one who would initiate having oral sex on that particular person, when they want, on a femme. I know a lot of studs. They don't like to be touched to a certain point, you know, you can touch them in certain places, but you know, you can't really touch them like on, on their, you know, vagina or so things that may make them feel feminine.

(Jay, focus group discussion)

These participants' descriptions of the hard stud with which they were familiar is similar to the stone butch described in the fictional autobiography of Feinberg's (1993) *Stone Butch Blues*. As such, it is possible that the language of 'hard stud' is an ethnic-specific term that denotes a lesbian gender category identified in other ethnic communities. While a few participants who identified themselves as either aggressive, tomboy or dominant volunteered that they usually or rarely allowed partners to penetrate them, it is important to note that focus group participants were not asked to describe their own sexual lives. Hence, data from this study cannot confirm or disconfirm the extent to which these 'hard' or 'stone' sexual scripts resonated with the sexual practice of the women in the study.

Illustrating how hard stud sexual scripts were understood by many black lesbians in the community, two primary reasons were provided by participants regarding why hard studs would demand that they not be touched during sex. One explanation was that hard studs were not comfortable with the parts of their bodies that defined them as female, mainly their breasts and vaginas. As such, a successful performance of the 'male' role during sex required that the hard stud's female body parts not be touched. Another reason concerned the meaning of being touched and seduced. That is, participants talked about the importance of maintaining the appearance of dominance in the sexual act for hard studs, and how being touched sexually or being the 'bottom' took away that sense of dominance and control. The vulnerability of being sexually aroused and pleased threatened the image of the dominant sexual partner. The contrast between these two explanations is significant. The first explanation, *rejecting femaleness*, is similar to the comments made by some transgender people regarding discomfort with their biological body parts that dictate mainstream society's current gendering system. However, the second explanation, *maintaining dominance*, is not about denying one's femaleness as expressed through the body but instead about accepting a view that being sexually pleased and aroused by another makes a person vulnerable. Being vulnerable does not fit the hegemonic masculine image, and hence does not fit with the image of a true stud.

This study was designed to examine sexual discourses – essentially, how black lesbians discussed sex and what cultural level sexual scripts were recognised in the community. While examining conflicts between cultural level norms and individual behaviour was not the aim of the current study, some participants noted that there is some evidence of transgression. Participants in two focus groups discussed studs they knew who had recently had vaginal sex with men and had children, behaviours that did not fit into the masculine lesbian gender identity role. It is quite likely that

many African-American studs and ultra-femmes alike engaged in sexual behaviours that transgressed expected community norms (beyond the mainstream norms they already transgress through sexual orientation and gender presentation), as was found in a study of the level of congruence between butch global presentation and actual self-presentation in sexual settings within a predominantly white sample (Rosenzweig and Lebow 1992).

### *Feminine expression*

Within the masculine/feminine dichotomy that was discussed by participants, there were also the 'pillow princesses' and 'ultra-femmes' at the other end of the lesbian gender spectrum. Similar to the hard stud category, these extreme femme labels have clear sexual behaviour roles. Ultra-femme was a label given to women who expressed themselves in high-fashion feminine ways, usually including heels, makeup and contouring or revealing clothing. Relevant to the current study, pillow princess was a special label for the ultra-femme that alluded to the sexual context. In particular, this label described a lesbian who prefers to be the receiver of sexual pleasure and acts, such as having oral sex performed on her. She is not expected or likely to perform any sexual acts on her partner. In a sexual encounter, the expectation is that ultra-femmes are the ones who will be vaginally penetrated with sex toys or fingers. While not all participants spoke to the relationship between sexual penetration and femme identities, one group agreed that a requirement to being labelled femme was that an individual liked penetration. It is notable that outside of acknowledging that this role may be a little selfish, no pathology related to body image or gender identity was ascribed to the role of pillow princess. In general, it was the role of hard stud that engendered the most resistance, as will be described in the next section.

### *Debate within the community about lesbian gender*

As Burch (1998) has noted, some activists and theorists argue that the adoption of femme and stud roles and labels is an attempt to replicate the gendered sexual norms in which lesbians were raised in the mainstream heterosexual society. Several community leaders and focus group participants thought similarly. For example, in one focus group, Wanda talked about the differences between white and black lesbians that she saw:

They are, and not just whites, but [also] other non-African-American lesbians see it as we are just two women that love each other. Whereas blacks say we are two women that love each other, however we do have roles. You know, and we are trying to in a sense maybe ascribe to a heterosexual way of life, or way of operating, in our relationship.

Kendra, a community leader who works in lesbian and gay health arenas, also reported that she felt that femme and butch labels appear to mimic traditional gender roles. However, she cautioned against the assumption that mimicking traditional gender roles automatically made lesbian gender label expression 'artificial'.

In contrast to those who disliked lesbian gender labels, some participants embraced them wholeheartedly in their own romantic and erotic lives. For example,

Gail, who proudly discussed her identification as femme and as a member of the 'butch-femme community', also conveyed to the group that their was a renaissance in the butch-femme movement that included reconfiguring butch and femme to mean more than a replication of heterosexual gender roles. She felt that contemporary butch-femme communities were more egalitarian than they had been when she was younger, where femmes were no longer placed in a subservient or domestic role.

Despite the large role that lesbian gender played in organising black lesbian sexual life, every focus group discussion revealed individuals' (within the group or people known by group participants) conscious and purposeful rejection of femme and stud labels/roles. There were several strategies used to reject the femme and stud categories within African-American lesbian communities: refusing to label oneself, feeling bothered by labels, feeling hopeful that the cultural scripts will change and avoiding hanging out with people who like labels. In one focus group discussion, Sheri said in response to a comment from another group participant:

I agree with that ... [I] don't identify in any of those butch/femme things. It is a mystery to me ... I don't disapprove of it, it just isn't who I am ... the role thing, it makes me a little nervous, but I realise that it's out there. That other folks are, that's who they are. And I understand the politics around those roles. But I don't choose it for myself.

As illustrated by this quote and many others in the study, some participants refused the labels for themselves and also expressed being bothered or irritated with the community trend to adopt labels. However, they also conveyed acceptance or tolerance for those that chose the labels, and for some, the choice to refuse labels for oneself was not incongruent with having an attraction to women who possess the characteristics those labels define.

In addition, several poets at the open mics spoke about struggling against expectations to label oneself in terms of lesbian gender. For example, one poet who enrolled into the study so that I could quote her poem speaks of wanting to drop these labels as she professes her attraction to a straight girl:

[T]he first time I laid eyes on you  
 my heart and soul despised of you  
 wondering why I couldn't dine with you  
 spend a little time with you  
 share a piece of mine with you  
 but that was on a Sunday  
 one day I took time to clear my mind of each and every thought of you  
 the fucked up labels that I brought to you ...  
 like STUD and FEMME,  
 DYKE and SHEM.  
 Just being me was a crime you see  
 cause I'm a FEMME living  
 STUD LOVING  
 thought you was my woman till you said you was my husband?????  
 Damn! our lifestyle is complex

that's what leaves the straight ones vexed  
thinking we all play roles and can't be role models.

(V-love)

Another poet who was interviewed as a community leader, Warrior, also expressed frustration and anger at being pressured into the label of stud or femme. As soon as I asked her to respond to my preliminary findings suggesting that lesbian gender roles were consistently discussed as a unique feature of African-American lesbian sexual culture, she commented that she wanted to resist the evidence that the phenomenon of butch and femme belongs to 'us' (i.e. black lesbians).

It was in the theme of lesbian gender that forms of resistance, an expected characteristic of sexual discourses (Schifter and Madrigal 2001), were most evident throughout the larger study. As noted earlier, resistance strategies ranged from individual choices to not identify with femme or stud roles, to open rejection of other lesbians who chose those identities. Most of the resistance discussed centred on critiquing the strictness of role expectations, not on lesbian gender expression per se. However, in cases where the frustration was directed specifically at those who identified with gender labels, the discontent was with masculine women, not the femmes. This theme has been observed in other work documenting the experiences of black studs and aggressives (Moore 2006). This is notable because it indicates that resistance against femme-stud lesbian gender expression is not an unqualified rejection of all black lesbians who express themselves in gendered ways. Unlike the conscious movement toward androgynous images which have characterised many middle-class white lesbian communities (Taylor and Rupp 1993), the black lesbians in this study who disagreed with lesbian gender roles were not arguing for the lack of all gendered expression. Instead, the resistance was centred on the rejection of masculine women, studs, who dare to transgress the Eurocentric mainstream cultural expectations for female feminine expression, as well as a possible mainstream black women's cultural expectations of women to operate somewhere between the realm of gender-blending and feminine expression.

#### *Between the extremes*

Despite a consistent description of femme and stud at the 'extremes' of lesbian gender expression, participants also discussed several labels that fell between the ultra-femme-hard stud ends of the continuum, such as 'soft stud' and 'aggressive femme'. Labels like these represented lesbians that blended both masculine and feminine ways in their public expression and/or sexual behaviours, but with a purposeful leaning toward either a more masculine or feminine identity. The common use of these terms appears contrary to the reports that there were dominant expectations of highly masculine or highly feminine modes of expression. Yet, the sets of sexual discourses that comprise a group's sexual culture are inherently contradictory and often disjointed from one another (Schifter and Madrigal 2001). There was a collective acknowledgment that dominant sexual discourses in black lesbian communities emphasised an expectation for choosing identities representing opposite sides of a single feminine-masculine continuum. Yet, this expectation did not prevent the expression of informal, less dominant sexual scripts that created room for blending characteristics along both masculine and feminine continua, similar to the 'gender blender' category found in Moore's (2006) study.



One of the community leader interviewees, Kendra, who was in her forties, asserted that the creation of new labels is one form of resistance to the strict dichotomy of stud and femme that arose out of the 'old school' African-American lesbian sexual culture. While the data in this study did not support this participant's suggestion that strict dichotomies were an artefact of only older African-American lesbian culture, the development and adoption of more labels, and thus a broader spectrum of role opportunities, could at minimum represent a quasi-organised movement towards changing an enduring dominant gendered sexual discourse among black lesbians.

### *A radical side to lesbian gender sex roles*

Although many focus group participants, community leaders and poets at the open mics argued that studs and femme roles were replications of heterosexual male and female sexual relationships, the sexual scripts for 'hard studs' and 'pillow princesses' appear to turn the traditional conceptualisation of fe/male sex roles on its head. US heterosexual men may be expected to be the sexual aggressors (as studs were described to be by participants), but they are typically not socialised to view sexual pleasure of *their female partner* as the primary outcome (Maines 1999). Similarly, whereas pillow princesses and other femmes appear to fall in line with heterosexual conceptualisations of sexual roles for women where the woman's role is the passive and non-assertive partner, they represent radical departures in other respects. In particular, participants indicated that ultra-femmes and pillow princesses fully expected that the sexual act ended with their sexual climax. This appears to be a reconceptualisation of the connection between femininity and sexual prowess, deeming the feminine partner as the primary physical beneficiary. In essence, the feminine partner is best viewed as *receptive*, rather than passive (Burch 1998).

### **Conclusions**

African-American lesbians in this study conveyed a set of sexual beliefs, attitudes and behaviours that influenced what types of sex they had, whom they dated and their behaviour within romantic relationships. This study highlighted that femme and stud roles were a dominant norm operating within this African-American lesbian community, yet there were also clearly informal and less dominant sexual discourses that included an integration of masculine and feminine forms of representation. Participants expressed various reactions to dominant scripts regarding lesbian gender roles, including celebration of the erotic power of lesbian gender as well as various forms of resistance.

While the intent of this study was more explicitly focused on sex than Moore's (2006) study of black lesbians, many of the findings related to dating and community expectations around partner choices were similarly reported in the two studies. The similarities of these two studies' findings from different cities, as well as several of the personal narratives discussed earlier, suggest that there may be a persistent sexual cultural script shared among black lesbians. These scripts may be rooted in an interpretation of African-American traditions. The ways in which these similarities are a function of the interaction between race, gender, sexuality and urban

living is not known and warrants further investigation. Additional research focusing on significant intracultural or intragroup differences will contribute greatly to theory that accurately represents the diversity of experiences and perspectives among this group which has traditionally been silenced around sex and sexuality.

## Notes

- 1 I use the term 'same-gender loving' women to refer to women who partner and have sex with women. This is a term that has emerged within US African-American gay and lesbian communities to represent the range of labels that may describe non-heterosexual peoples and to counter Eurocentric gay and lesbian terminology.
- 2 Community leaders were selected for their experience in working within black lesbian communities or because of their work as sexual health educators in ethnically diverse lesbian communities. Due to confidentiality, the individual demographics are not provided, however, they collectively comprise a group of community organisers, artists, religious leaders, public health directors and sex workshops facilitators.

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